

# Sami's Surgery and the Rehab Summer

By Harold Ueber

In June 2000 I wrote an article about my two English cocker spaniels entitled *Living with the Bumpus Dogs*. I mentioned in passing that Sami, my older dog, had come up lame and that I was weighing options for her treatment. Sami has been healthy and fit for most of her nine years, although the last couple of years she had been showing signs of stiffness after a day of hunting. I gave her an aspirin at night and she always seemed to work her way out of it and into good physical condition.

I didn't think her stiffness was a serious threat to her mobility until one morning in early April she went outside and came back favoring her left hind leg. It still didn't occur to me that it was as serious as it turned out to be. She would improve with rest, but continued to limp. She retrieved her dummy and competed with Zoe, but it was becoming more apparent by her movements that she was uncomfortable.

After a couple of weeks of aspirin therapy, observation and lessened activity we couldn't see any real progress. We took her to our veterinarian, Dr. Mike Frenette, who checked her hind leg and determined there was lateral movement in her knee. He told us she probably had a torn or severed anterior cruciate ligament. Surgery would be required if she were to have a chance to regain normal use of her leg and combat arthritis in the joint.

Eight years of tough duty in the hunting fields, falling into holes, running into fences, braving cold water, and going full tilt for wounded roosters took its toll over time and set her up for the final tear, whatever may have caused it. We decided to have Sami's leg surgically repaired and prepared ourselves for weeks of rehabilitation.

Dr. Frenette explained surgical options to Vonny and me before recommending an option that in layman's terms is called "over the top," a surgery that utilizes the dog's patellar ligament as an anatomical replacement for the anterior cruciate ligament. It was a procedure that would require an orthopedic surgeon and there wasn't one practicing in North Dakota. We could opt for a surgery that could be done in Bismarck, one that used monofil-

ament fishing line as replacement support for the torn ligament. While Dr. Frenette said he could and would do the surgery using monofilament, he felt obligated to tell us that there were other options, probably better options. He recommended an orthopedic surgeon at a veterinary teaching hospital at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa.

We considered a trip to Ames, but considering Sami's age, I was concerned about the effect, not only of the surgery, but of the 10-hour trip down and back. She has never liked travel, but in recent years has come to tolerate it better than in the past. I searched the Internet for information and started talking to fellow dog owners.

*Sami required weeks of rehabilitation after cruciate ligament surgery.*



I found two colleagues whose hunting dogs had undergone the surgery I was considering: Ted Uppgren's setter, Zeti had the surgery after blowing out a ligament on a hunt for sharptails. She was progressing nicely, but was diagnosed with cancer before the year was out and had to be put down before the leg could really be tested in the field.

Greg Link's Labrador, Tanner, had surgery on both hind legs and had hunted successfully after a summer of rehabilitation, but recently had been showing signs of stiffness, although the Lab's knees, stabilized by surgery, were tight. Yet, he still had problems.

As I continued my investigation, I discovered that many dog owners, especially owners of hunting dogs, were faced with similar situations and decisions such as the one we were facing: Surgery or not? If so, what surgical technique? What were reasonable expectations of recovery and a return to an active life that included hunting? There were a lot of factors to consider and we made our decision based on the assumption that regardless of the technique used, if the surgery was successful, Sami would have a chance to resume activity and enjoy a healthy life. Without surgery her condition would probably worsen and be complicated by arthritis.

We decided to do the surgery locally and on May 3, 2000 I dropped Sami off at Dr. Frenette's vet clinic and went to work, wondering if I had done the right thing. She had surgery that morning and we picked her up in late afternoon with instructions to be very careful about her physical activity and to keep her bandage clean and dry for the 14 days it had to stay in place. We also had a regimen of antibiotics to guard against infection and Rimydal for pain.

We had done as much as we could to make her homecoming comfortable and safe by providing a larger kennel for sleeping and child gates to prevent her from jumping up on her favorite chair or the couch. We were careful to keep her away from the rambunctious Zoe, but Zoe seemed to understand that something was wrong and was careful in her curiosity.

How would we keep her bandage clean and dry? We knew many of the trips outside in the next 14 days, would be in wet grass from spring rains or early morning dew. The original thought of fashioning a bread sack to cover the injured leg lost its appeal. Sami's bandage covered her foot and extended to her hip. We needed something with water repellent qualities that would easily fit over the leg and that could be secured at the top. That evening I went off to Wal-Mart in search of the

perfect covering. I scoured the store examining everything from vacuum cleaner bags, to clothes pin bags, to garbage bags. Unable to find any one thing that fit our needs, I chose oven cooking bags and from the sporting goods department, a small bag of three nylon ditty bags which promised to be water resistant.

All but one of the ditty bags was too small, but the largest looked promising if only it were a little longer so it would come up higher on Sami's leg. It took only a trip or two outside with the ditty bag for Vonny to see the possibilities for improving the bandage cover. I purchased another pack of bags and she sewed an extension on the top of the first bag and fashioned a draw string. She then customized an oven bag by splitting it and resizing it with the aid of super glue. She added a drawstring and fashioned an interior lining for the ditty bag that was easy to put on and effective when the grass was wet from dew or rain. If Dr. Frenette gave an award for the cleanest bandage, we wanted to win it.

Sami's leg was without much support the first few days after surgery, while she figured out how to best use it. In some cases dogs will chew on their bandages, but that was not a problem and we were relieved. At night we could hear her shift around in her kennel trying to get comfortable, but not one whimper from her during the whole process. We gave her pain medication for a few days, but she didn't seem to need it, so we took her off of it.

She started bearing weight on her injured leg prior to getting her bandage off and we struggled to keep her from running and jumping. Despite our best efforts she jumped up on her favorite chair and took a trip up and down the stairs to the basement, something she was reluctant to do before her surgery. We finally decided that we could do only so much, but would continue to protect her as much as possible, trusting her tolerance to pain and hoping she wouldn't destabilize her knee through too much activity.

It eventually became a question of determining when activity constitutes



The "Dog Mom" shirt Vonny is wearing bears witness to her caring nature. This photo was taken in May, 2000 when Sami was less than two weeks out of surgery. A leash was necessary to prevent her from running and jumping on her surgically-repaired hind leg.

rehabilitation. I noticed an interesting adaptation and saw it several times during the course of her healing. When she encountered a barrier she wanted to scale, she used her front legs to pull herself and lessened the need to push off her hind legs. At first, I thought I was imagining it, but later became convinced she had found a way to compensate until her leg strengthened.

At four weeks post-surgery, she was interested in pursuing birds and critters. I curbed her instinct whenever possible, but sometimes I was too late. For example, one morning in week four I turned her outside without her leash. She spotted a cottontail and before I could react, she had dashed to the corner of the house and sniffed at the opening the "kwafty wabbit" had used to escape. When she emerged from behind a bush and wasn't limping, I was relieved. In early June, one could still sense tenderness in her leg when touched, and sometimes she



avored it, but her hair had grown out enough that without close examination one did not notice the surgical incision.

By mid-summer I was swimming her on a regular basis, exercise that she seemed to prefer and tolerate better than walking. I gradually increased the amount of swimming and walking as we neared fall. Would she be ready for the fall hunting seasons? Was it a reasonable expectation?

When the dove season opened I took both girls for short runs, more for exercise than as hunting excursions. By grouse season I extended the length of our walks and despite care to avoid terrain that would be tough for Sami to handle, I stumbled into situations that tested her mettle and my judgement.

There were signs that too much activity affected her weakened leg. At home after resting she would sometimes struggle to get to her feet and favor her left hind leg. Stiffness was common but usually short-lived when we gave her Rimydal. The concern for overdoing her exercise was overshadowed by the fact that without exercise there was little chance the leg would ever be stronger. Physically, she wasn't the same dog I had hunted the

year before, but she was eager and it was hard to leave her home, although I did on occasion. Despite apparent weakness and discomfort, she still was bearing weight on both legs. Sami at half-speed was preferable to no Sami at all.

I decided I would take her hunting as much as possible, but not expect too much of her. Naive! Her desire to hunt was not compromised and she hunted hard and ventured into places that I thought she might avoid, like the brush of a steep woody draw. She had a final test before pheasant season on Morton County WMA when we walked three or four miles looking for sharptails. Sami gave the best she had to offer under tough conditions. I questioned whether she was up to it and if I hadn't put her into situations too tough for her to handle: heavy vegetation, thick brush and the ups and downs of woody draw hunting. About the only thing I noticed that was different was her unwillingness to tackle the thickest brush and tangles that Zoe would handle with ease, but she has always been discriminating and avoided tangles where

she didn't detect bird scent. Maybe she will be self-regulating and recognize some limitations because of her leg? I thought to myself. My desire to protect her was overridden by her desire to participate.

As I watched her hunt over the next few weeks I was careful not to overwork her, and when she wanted to rest, we would rest. During the warm October days she didn't seem to tire any sooner than Zoe did, but our hunts were short for the most part. On my birthday, in late October, it has become tradition to hunt birds with friends. On a day that was to see long walks under some tough conditions, she successfully flushed and retrieved the only pheasant I shot, outracing Zoe for the fallen bird. It was a great birthday present. I kenneled her before the last walk of the day and she didn't object. She was stiff and sore the next morning, but so was I.

Winter entered North Dakota early and brought snow and cold temperatures. The day before deer season, November 9, was cold and sunny with several inches of soft

## Rehab, Rehab, Rehab

The reason I wrote this story was to give readers an idea of what is involved in treating cruciate ligament damage in dogs, particularly hunting dogs. I questioned veterinarians, dog owners and spent considerable time on the Internet finding all the information I could about cruciate ligament damage and repair. Considerations, such as Sami's age, the extent of the injury and the amount of

joint degeneration were all part of the decision to have the surgery done.

The most important consideration after surgery is a commitment to the extensive rehabilitation process necessary for the dog to regain its capabilities. This is a difficult and long-term process requiring a great deal of personal commitment and patience. Indecision about the level of exercise desirable was a cause for concern — too much, not enough, when, where, what kind was best. I struggled with all sorts of questions.

Rehabilitation after surgical treatment for cruciate ligament damage requires a period during which one is admonished to keep the dog's weight down and restrict its activity for eight to 12 weeks, a task which is beyond what is humanly possible with any dog with which I've been associated.

At some point in the process, one gives up and trusts the dog to regulate its own activity within the guidelines of the rehabilitator's common sense. Rehabilitation then becomes more relaxed and playful until a level of recovery is reached. Sami continues to do well and is approaching her second hunting season after surgery. I work her in the back yard almost every night for short periods of time and am looking forward to once again having two cockers in the field this fall.

*When the bandage was removed in late May, Sami's hair had grown to the point where the incision running across her knee was barely visible. She was beginning to assert herself and leashing was still necessary to control her activity when outside.*



snow on the ground. In southwestern North Dakota, it was a good day for pheasant hunting, probably the last one for awhile. As it turned out, it was Sami's last hunt of the fall, but one that showed her desire hadn't been compromised by injury. The birds were wild and snow balls built up on the dogs' chests and ice gathered between the toes of their feet. Zoe took it all in stride and was excited for the chase. Sami hunted close and was measured in her approach. I shot two birds that day, both found and retrieved by Zoe, but it didn't seem to matter. Sami was in her glory and flushed her share. In late afternoon as we prepared for our final long walk through thick CRP, I put Sami in her kennel to rest. She was wet and cold, her chest a mat of tiny snowballs. I rubbed her with a dry towel and I thought she would be content to stay in her kennel. Maybe it was the prospect of seeing Zoe bounce off that gave her that extra energy and the will to compete. Her heart said, Go! I couldn't find it in mine to say, No. Off we went.

Near the end of our walk, Sami was tired and foot sore. I thought I might have to carry her as she would walk only short distances before stopping. She was

exhausted, but moved slowly toward the end of the CRP strip. Zoe was showing signs that she too needed rest. The bounce had gone out of her. She stayed close to me, her short tail curled down between her legs. Pheasants were flushing wild in front of us or off to the side. No one was much interested in pursuit. When we finally hit the trail for the walk back to the yard where we had parked the car we were ready to quit and both dogs were ready for their kennels. Four of us had killed nine roosters. It was a challenging hunt and real test of Sami's surgical repair and stamina. She had hunted five hours, in snow and CRP, and except for the final stretch had shown little sign of fatigue.

That night, Sami took Rimydal and slept soundly with little stiffness to show for her efforts. Zoe was bouncing around the next morning, but was ready for a nap after breakfast. I fought off my old nemesis, Charley Horse, with a hot bath and tonic water, and prayed he wouldn't tie me up during the night. We all recovered nicely by the next day.

I wish I could tell you that because of her surgery that Sami is as good as new, but that would be a stretch. She still favors

her left hind leg and she is sometimes slow to get up, but despite all of that, she is better than she would have been if the ligament rupture was left untreated, which when all is said, was the overriding factor in the decision to have it done. We haven't exercised like we should and I winced when I saw her maneuver on ice and hard snow last winter. We are now working in the back yard on a daily basis to strengthen her leg beyond what it is now.

Sami, now 10 years old, still loves to swim and retrieve her training dummy. As long as her health remains good and she expresses desire to go afield, I will hunt her as circumstances warrant. There were times last fall when I left her home because I felt conditions might be too tough on her. It was the second time I have had to make the decision to limit a hunting dog's time afield for medical reasons and it wasn't any easier for having done it before, but as Sami replaced Max as my hunting partner, so will Zoe overtake Sami in time spent in the field. That is just the way of things.

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*Sami and Zoe with a pair of roosters at the end of a perfect day.*

